

*Stolen Pictures, Stolen Dreams*

**An Honors Thesis (ART 480)**

**by**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Russell', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

**Ball State University**

**Muncie, IN**

May 2013

**Expected Date of Graduation**

May 2013

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## Abstract

For as long as I can remember, I have had a dream every time I go to sleep. Dreaming is not an uncommon occurrence but I have a very special connection with mine because my mother has rarely ever had one. Growing up, my mother would always tell me that the reason I have dreams when I sleep and she does not is because when I was born I “stole her pictures.” I had never thought this idea odd until it was pointed out to me; yet once I started thinking about it, the basis for my photographic series was formed. I began considering nightmares and fantasies as mental constructions and, in an effort to better understand them, turned them into physical constructions that were made to be photographed. Plaster casts of hands accompany the images in order to further the idea that these dreams are stolen from another and that I am claiming them as my own.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jacinda Russell first and foremost for agreeing to be my mentor on this project and for pushing me to make it the best that it can be. Her guidance during the process of writing, photographing, and sculpting helped make this project far less stressful than it would have been otherwise. I would also like to thank her for pushing me personally to be the best artist that I can be and for helping me prepare for my artistic life after school.

I would like to thank Mark Sawrie and the Advanced Directions class for all of the helpful advice on this series and all of the critical feedback as well.

I would like to thank my mother for telling me that I “stole her pictures” all my life because there would be no project without that.

I like to think of myself as a dreamer. While it is true that saying that phrase brings to mind a person who has many ambitions in life (and I certainly do), I mean it in the sense that almost every night since childhood, I have had an extremely vivid fantasy. It is not an uncommon thing for people to have visions when they sleep, but I do almost every night without fail, and remember them upon waking. I have always had a special connection with the fact that I dream because when I was a child, my mother used to tell me that the reason she does not, is because when I was born I “stole her pictures.” I always thought that saying was kind of funny but never thought much of it because she said it so often and matter-of-factly. Only recently has it occurred to me that perhaps telling a child that they stole something of yours, even something as uncontrollable as dreams, is odd.

When thinking about what my mother used to tell me, I came to the realization that the dreams I have now are the ones she could be having. It was this thought that propelled my idea forward. I constructed representational models of my fantasies and nightmares out of construction paper and board; then I photographed and printed them. In order to show how these dreams have been stolen from another, I made plaster casts of my hands to hold the images, giving the illusion that the hands are carrying the photographs off the wall or floor. The final installation creates a dreamlike picture with hands and arms coming out of the walls and floors to hold photographs, bringing the project full circle in its purpose.

There are ten photographs, each one depicting a different dream that I have had in my lifetime. Some of them are recurring visions that I have had since early childhood while some of them are very recent. Many of them I have only had once, but they struck me as so odd that they immediately came to mind when I began planning this series. Each photograph has either one or two plaster hands to hold them. The hands themselves are in different positions, some simply held out to catch falling pictures, some menacingly holding the edges, and so on. When all of the images and hands are put together in an installation, they form a picture on their own that is reminiscent of fantasy and nightmare alike.

One of the most important questions often asked about a piece of art is why is it significant? However, it is difficult to pin down the significance of a work of art because it means something different to each person looking at it; the social significance or its place in contemporary art also cannot be known at the outset. All I can really know is how this piece is

personally significant and my opinion on how or why it might become relevant in the future. For me, the series is a way to make something out of the dreams that I have been holding onto since I was a child. Dreams are important and are many times overlooked by those who have them. These kinds of visions do not necessarily tell us what is going to happen in the future and the symbolism is not always immediately recognized, but being conscious of what goes on in our unconscious is an important part of better understanding ourselves. My mother does not have dreams and that was a foreign concept to me growing up since I always have; her telling me that I “stole her pictures” is almost like her telling me that I robbed her of understanding her unconscious mind. I hope that by making this piece I can prompt others to think about the visions they have in sleep.

Utilizing a multimedia approach is also significant in my work because with so many people going into the arts, photographers especially, it is important to set myself apart in some way. This reflects the artistic need to try new things since sculpture is not something that I am necessarily familiar with. The sculptural aspect of my presentation, besides representing theft, also represents a break from the traditional mode of gallery display. This series is also another step in working with staged photography, which has become an important part of my portfolio, as well as being the kind of work that I want to pursue after graduation. I have the need to control my surroundings in my work, as a lot of people do, and staging my photographs fully allows me to do this. I appreciate the element of chance within art, but control is something that we, as a generation, are losing and this is just one small thing that I have complete say over.

While this series has certainly stemmed from personal experience, there are several outside influences for my work as well. However, the first and foremost of these were still my dreams. I have had vivid dreams since childhood and because of this, they have been an important part of my life. I used components of my dreams to look at what is important to me because they generally show up as pieces of the larger vision. They helped me to keep my imagination alive as well as informed me about my subconscious thoughts, like things I am stressed about or obsessing over at the time. While I did not choose to show these more personal aspects of my dreams, the images still came straight from the night visions that I have.





James Casebere, *Courtroom*, 1983, gelatin silver print

Looking beyond my personal influences, I was greatly influenced by the work of James Casebere. He is known for creating spaces and scenes completely out of paper and board and it was his work that made me interested in creating my dream spaces out of paper. While much of his work is meant to look like a real space, he also has images where the houses and spaces looked very much like crafted pieces. His early paper constructions did not utilize realistic details, creating a sense of un-reality that is both believable and eerie at the same time. For example, this piece entitled *Court Room* from 1980, is noticeably constructed but there is still a strange sense of reality that makes the viewer question if what they are looking at is real or not. This questioning comes from not showing the construction of the miniature pieces at all and lighting them as dramatically as a real scene might be lit (like for a movie).

Another artist who works this way is Thomas Demand. He creates rooms and scenes from paper, often drawing inspiration from political or social events. Perhaps the most inspiring thing about his work, though, was that the models he creates are life-size. He also uses well-known places, such as the White House Oval Office, and purposely leaves people out of the image as a commentary on the space rather than the things that might happen there. One of his most well-known images is *Clearing* from 2003. The initial glance shows a forest clearing with the sun streaming in; closer inspection, however, shows that each individual leaf is made out of paper. The double-take reaction was exactly what I wanted to happen with my photographs too, so I took a lot of cues from Demand in terms of showing construction without giving too much away.



Thomas Demand, *Clearing*, 2003, chromogenic color print

Laurie Simmons was perhaps the biggest artistic influence on this series. She also constructs her scenes, though she does so on a larger scale, out of wood (like a theatre set). I was interested in the way that she uses light, color, and the photo-realistic cut-out within each of her constructed images. The miniature paper people act as a way for Simmons to let the viewer know that they are looking at small models and not real rooms. As soon as I saw her work, I was instantly interested in utilizing paper cut-outs in a similar style; they became a realistic element that would function as a way to make people question the scene. Her use of color is also intriguing because she mixes colored lights to make the scene look realistic despite the fact that they are miniature constructions. While my work is specifically aimed at being dream-like, I still took a lot of cues from Laurie Simmons and it is her work that will inspire me beyond my thesis series.



Laurie Simmons, *Long House (Orange and Green Lounge)*, 2004, cibachrome print

Once all of these inspirations were collected, after much research and discussion, I began planning my first scenes. I spent a lot of time sketching and making extensive notes in a sketchbook before I began photographing. The planning stage allowed me to figure out exactly how I wanted the picture to look, from camera angle to color and lighting so that I could avoid stumbling blindly through a photo shoot. Once I was satisfied with a direction of a particular scene, I collected the photo-realistic imagery from the internet. The cut-outs were a way to show how dreams pull from real life; because I did not want them to be too specific to me, I decided to find them online. Once I found that piece of the image, I would then cut out the scenery from white mat board and build anything that needed to be more three-dimensional (like shelves or a table). The construction stage was by far the most time consuming part of the entire process.

Every single photograph was shot within the confines of a miniature room that was also built out of white board. Once the individual pieces were complete, I would set them up within this white room based on the sketch I had made of that image. I wanted to show some of the assembly of each set-up, so I allowed the tape or rough edges to remain visible to the camera. This was important because building physical representations of dreams as a metaphor for the mental construction meant that I needed something to hint at the artificiality within each scene.



The lighting was the last thing to be set up before the image was taken. Because I was working with paper and board, everything had a very flat quality to it. However, the lighting created specific shadows depending on where it was set up that helped break the space apart and create a more three-dimensional look. I utilized desk lamps for overall lighting and flashlights for spotlighting. The lights were covered with colored acetate in order to establish a particular mood for each image; the colored lighting also produced the dream-like quality that each image has. That was the most experimental part of the process because the atmosphere of each piece depends on the color within the room so I made sure to try a lot of different combinations to find the right one.



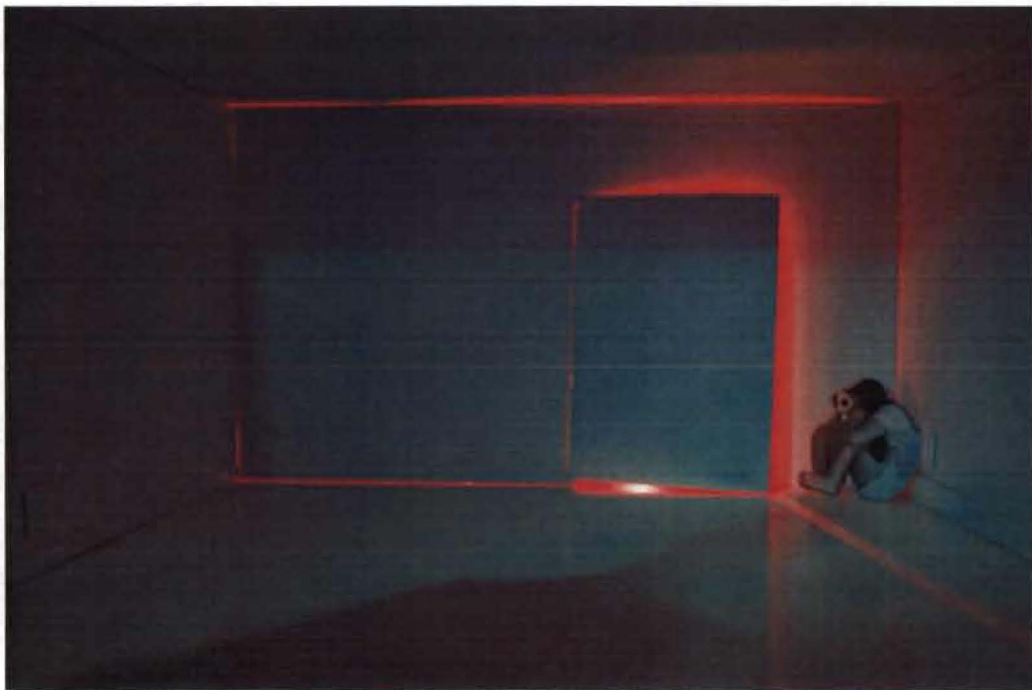
*Stolen Pictures, Stolen Dreams* installation

The images are only half of the installation, though. The plaster hands that hold each photograph represent the theft of the dreams and my reclamation of them. In order to make these, I dipped my hands in hot wax (around 150° F) in order to have a mold into which I could pour the plaster. I had to dip each hand between ten and twelve times in order for the mold to be strong enough for me to remove the hand without ripping it. I then filled them with white plaster and attached the necessary hardware while they were still drying. This was the quickest part of my process because I could make several hands in one sitting. These hands hold the images in



frames in the final installation. The frames are painted white so that the hands and frames would work together without taking focus away from the photographs.

Perhaps my most successful piece from this series is *The Boogeyman*. It was the first scene that I shot and it set the mood for the images that followed. Each photograph has a personal dream that goes along with it and I set up the miniature construction with that in mind. In this particular one, I ran away from home because I was frightened that a monster was going to get me. I ran up the street to my old karate studio and ended up cowering in the corner because I was so scared. All of a sudden, a bright green light flashed and the next thing I knew, a figure walked toward me. It was then that I woke up. The nightmare left me anxious and I wanted to convey in the picture.



*The Boogeyman*, 2013, archival inkjet print

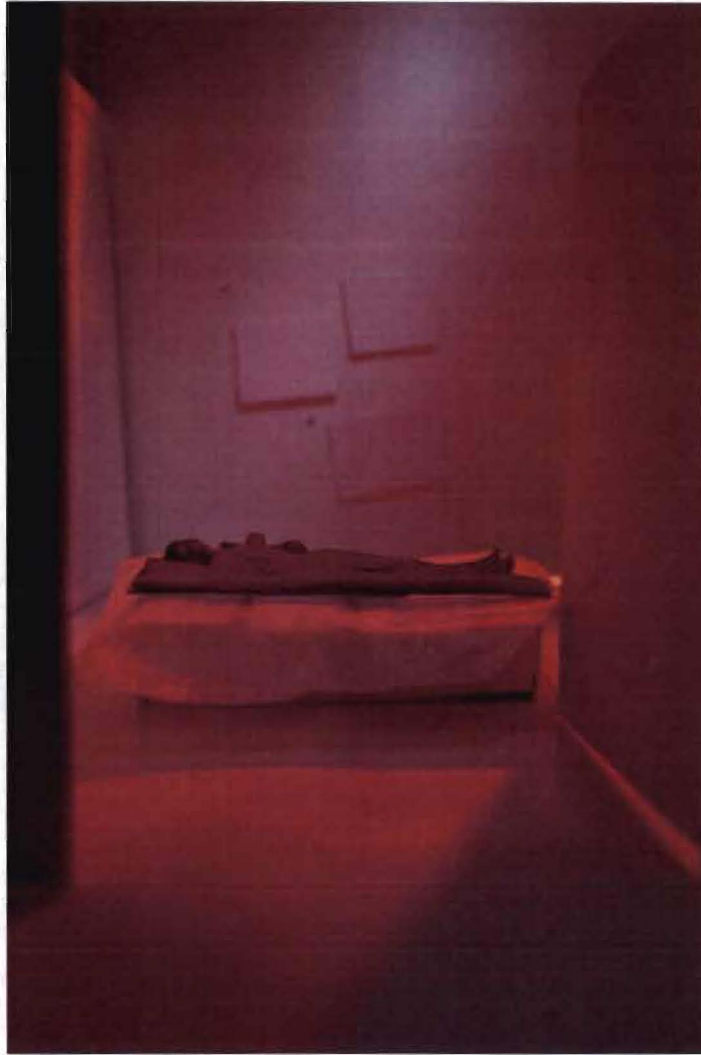
In order to achieve this anxiety, I added a bright red light for a more menacing feel to the scene. It also acted as a way to show the construction, because the walls and door did not fit together exactly as they would if it was a real room, and the light accentuated that. The girl figure in the scene was found online by searching for “cowering child.” The shadow on the floor was a paper cut-out of a man that was backlit with a flashlight covered in green acetate. The angle of the silhouette was also important because it draws the viewer’s eye through the image in

a very specific way; it also connects the shadow to the figure of the girl, giving a hint of the dream that inspired the photograph.

This piece is important to the series because it is a universally recognizable dream. The boogeyman is one of the most well-known childhood monsters and almost everyone has encountered with it either in a nightmare, the monster in the closet, or under the bed. This image needed to be part of my series because not only will people be able to connect with it on a personal level, it also comments on how despite the individuality of dreams, there are still universalities among them. This project is very personal to the visions that I have, but I still want the viewer to be able to relate it to their own experiences.

Another photograph from the series that is important is *The Sleeper*. In this dream, I was on a boat that was filled with doors. One of these doors, a red one, was on the top level of the ship, right in the center and seemed more important than all the others. I opened the door and peered inside but did not enter. Inside was a man sleeping on a bed in a room that was as red as the entrance. I wanted to go inside and investigate but I knew that I did not have time so I moved on. Shortly after, I woke up. It seems like a minute detail in a larger dream, but for some reason that was the part that stuck with me the longest.

One of the most interesting things about this image is that everyone immediately wants to know what is happening with the man on the bed. It is natural to be curious when the entire story is not provided and that is exactly the kind of reaction that I am looking for with the photographs in this series. The story is not provided and the viewer must rely on the title, the subject, and their own experience in order to come up with a personal interpretation. More than any of the other pieces in my series, this one incited the exact reaction that I was seeking.



*The Sleeper*, 2013, archival inkjet print

This photograph was made in the same way that the others were except for the lighting. In order to achieve that shining ray of light, I set my camera for a long exposure and used a flashlight during part of it. The rest of the time, the lighting came from a lamp covered with red acetate. Another thing that sets this piece apart from the others is that it was shot from the other side of the model. While the other images were taken from an open front, like on a stage, this one was taken through the door (which can be seen in *The Boogeyman*, next to the girl). This is important to note because the room represents the mind of the dreamer and every single photograph is set within it.



The most important thing that has come from making *Stolen Pictures, Stolen Dreams* is the expansion of my artistic practice. I knew that I wanted to push myself with my thesis, and in doing so I discovered something that I will incorporate into my future work; I will use miniature models and colored lighting within my staged photography from now on. However, while I enjoyed working on this series, I think that it has come to an end. There are more dreams that I could turn into images, but working with my visions has reminded me that one of the joys of them is their fleeting quality. Still, working with my subconscious thoughts has helped me to understand them better. I also feel like I have a better handle on where I want to go with my future work because of this body of work.

## Bibliography

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14 Mar. 2013.

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14 Mar. 2013.

*Stolen Pictures, Stolen Dreams*

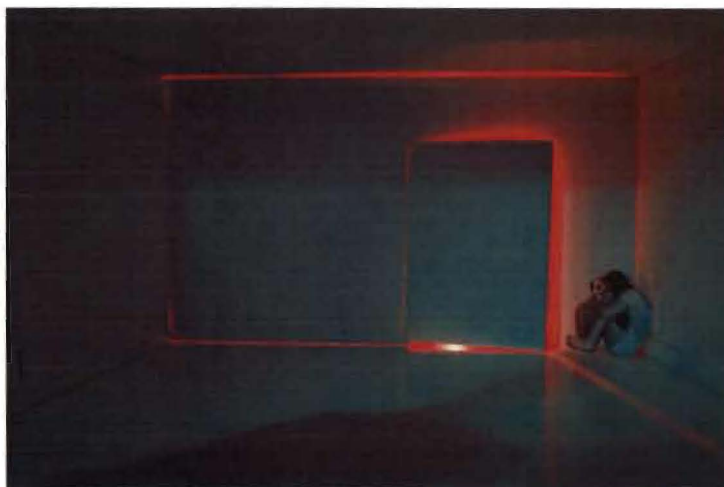
**Image List**

1. *The Boogeyman*

Archival Inkjet Print

17" x 22"

2013



2. *The Entrance*

Archival Inkjet Print

17" x 22"

2013

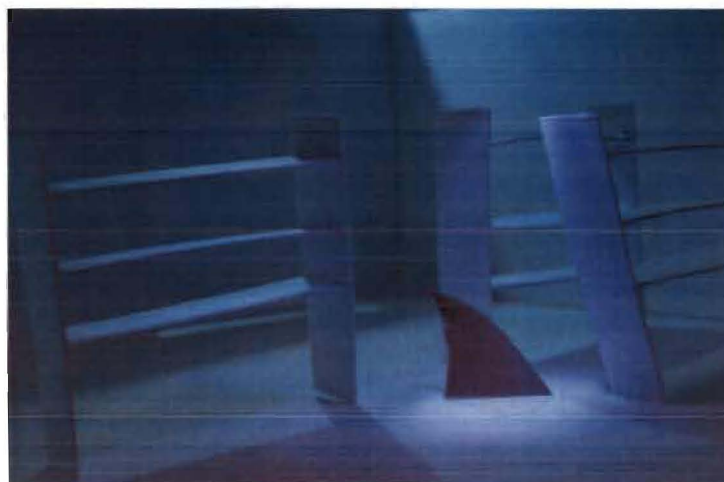


3. *The Library*

Archival Inkjet Print

17" x 22"

2013





4. *The Sleeper*

Archival Inkjet Print

22" x 17"

2013



5. *The Drowning*

Archival Inkjet Print

22" x 17"

2013



6. *The Victim*

Archival Inkjet Print

17" x 22"

2013



7. *The Badger's Kitchen*

Archival Inkjet Print

17" x 22"

2013



8. *The Crash*

Archival Inkjet Print

17" x 22"

2013



9. *The White Forest*

Archival Inkjet Print

17" x 22"

2013

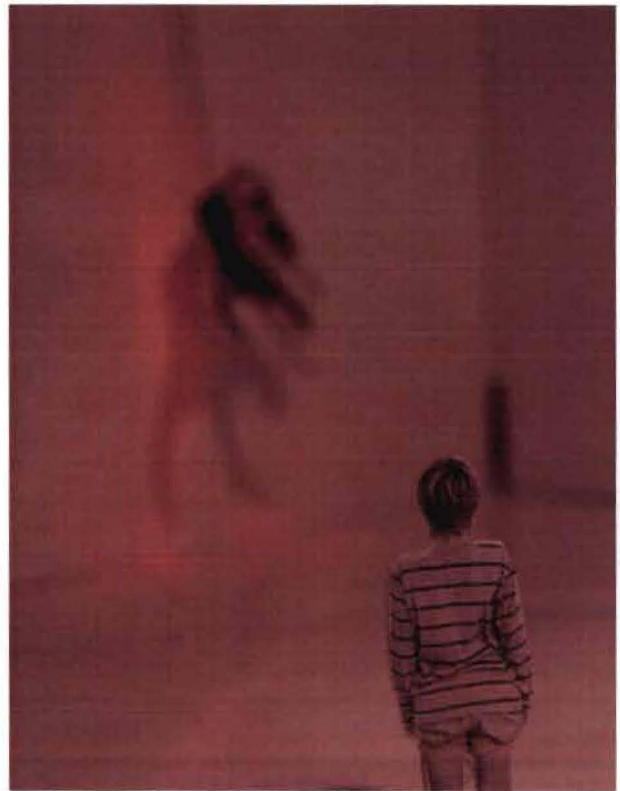


10. *The Bystander*

Archival Inkjet Print

22" x 17"

2013





Installation View (Overall)



Installation View (Group 1)



Installation View (Group 2)

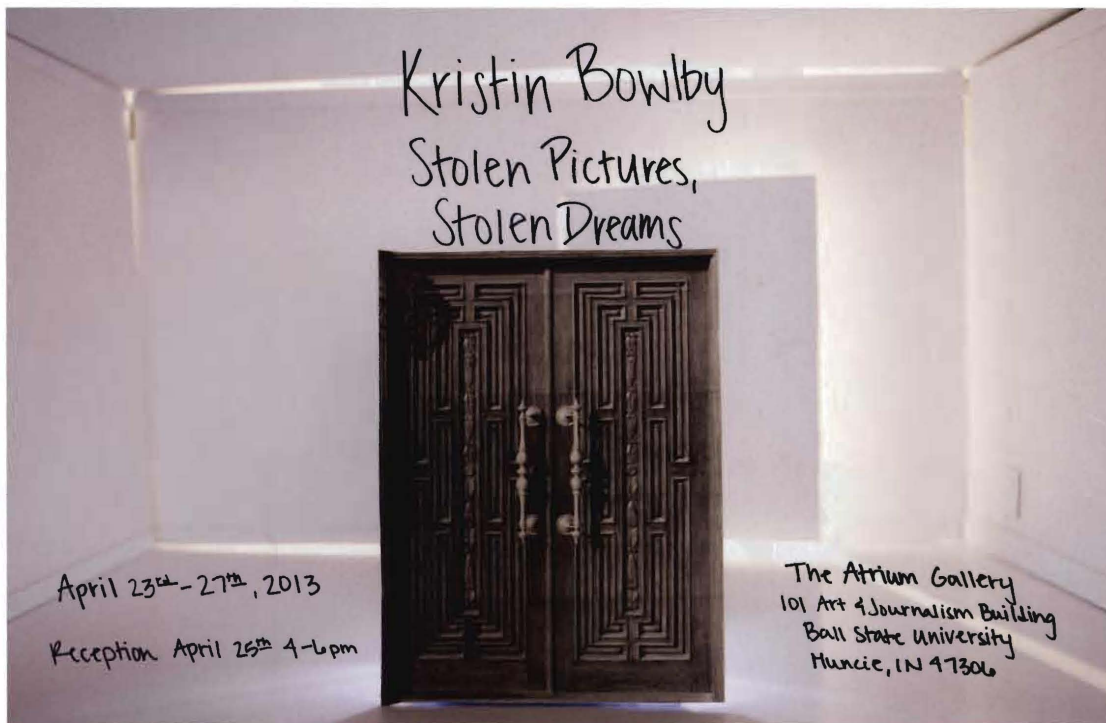


Installation View (Group 3)



Installation View (Group 4)







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